

Blu-ray Review: Great Extras Enhance Mike Birbiglia's 'Sleepwalk with Me'

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on January 3, 2013 - 9:48am

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CHICAGO – Sometimes the best way for comics to find an ideal vehicle for their abilities is to direct it themselves. 2012 offered ample proof of that, with Louis C.K. and Lena Dunham setting a stupendously high bar for TV comedy with their respective self-made programs. Of course, “Louis” and “Girls” benefit greatly from the contributions of their first-rate ensembles, yet both are also driven by a singular vision.

I can't imagine a better person to direct the adaptation of Mike Birbiglia's 2008 one-man stage show than Birbiglia himself. He's already proven in a series of bit roles (most notably in Lynn Shelton's “Your Sister's Sister” and on Dunham's “Girls”) that he's a master of awkward humor as excruciatingly funny as it is painfully authentic. His nonchalant mannerisms and seemingly offhanded line delivery are so believable that it frankly hurts to watch his alter ego bomb onstage, even as his failure delivers guffaw upon guffaw.



Blu-ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

Not only is the briskly entertaining, 75-minute “Sleepwalk with Me” one of the funniest films of 2012, it is also one of the most insightful autobiographical explorations of a comedian's psyche in recent memory. As the wonderfully named Matt Pandamiglio, Birbiglia captures the fumbling ambivalence of a man unready to commit to a potential marriage with his longtime girlfriend, Abby (the ever-sublime Lauren Ambrose). Though he keeps his misgivings to himself for fear of hurting Abby, they gradually come out during his stand-up routines and prove to be a big hit with audiences. Only when an element of vulnerable truth seeps into his comedy does it begin to connect with others (Natalie West learned the same lesson in Nathan Adloff's “Nate & Margaret”). Cinema is an ideal medium for Birbiglia's show since it allows him to externalize the fantasies that Pandamiglio suddenly finds himself trapped within, as his habit of sleepwalking takes increasingly dangerous turns. James Rebhorn and Carol Kane are a stitch as Pandamiglio's parents while Marc Maron and Alex Karpovsky turn up in excellent cameos. Yet this is Birbiglia's show through and through, and he proves to have an enormously engaging screen presence. He earns the audience's empathy even as he makes exceedingly wrong-headed choices (he prefaces a particularly embarrassing episode by telling the audience, “Remember, you're on MY side”). There's even a dash of Woody Allen in Birbiglia's bittersweet ode to an ill-fated romance built on “pizza-flavored ice cream and delusion.”



Sleepwalk with Me was released on Blu-ray and DVD on December 18th, 2012.

Photo credit: IFC Films

"Sleepwalk with Me" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.85:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English and Spanish subtitles and includes a fascinating audio commentary track with Birbiglia and his co-writer/producer Ira Glass (of "This American Life"). With surprising candidness, they deconstruct precisely how they altered the film in post-production to sharpen the humor after some disastrous preview screenings. Birbiglia's narration was originally delivered to the camera in the middle of scenes with other characters, breaking the fourth wall a la "Annie Hall," yet those moments ended up fatally interrupting the film's pacing. So Birbiglia reshot those dialogue passages as a self-contained monologue to the camera, while adding in some hilarious shtick, such as his great opening routine about the noisy moviegoer on his cell phone. Another punchline delivered by Kane never got a response from audiences until editor Geoffrey Richman inserted a deadpan reaction of Rebhorn (which likely was captured between takes). Perhaps the funniest tidbit of all is the minimalist insert that somehow managed to end the multitude of audience complaints regarding the inexplicable attraction between Matt and Abby. After Birbiglia included a brief early scene where Matt and Abby kiss and laugh, the complaints instantly evaporated.

Rounding out the special features are a series of behind-the-scenes featurettes (including a chat with Dr. William C. Dement, who materializes during one of Matt's dreams) and an outtake reel where Birbiglia's faked moans are interrupted by an actual scream (to say more would be criminal). But the extra that truly cements this disc's five-star status is the 34-minute Q&A moderated by Joss Whedon at the Writer's Guild Foundation. To see Whedon, Birbiglia and Glass riff on their faux Twitter feud and their dueling box office returns is to watch three comic titans at the top of their game. There's also a poignant moment when Birbiglia reveals the reaction of his real-life ex-girlfriend (who served as the inspiration for Abby) to the film following its premiere. Yet this is mainly a laugh riot chockfull of priceless lines, such as when Whedon predicts that Birbiglia will "do for vague discomfort what Ralph Fiennes did for weird sexual moral turpitude." "Avengers" fans will be pleased to know that Whedon even shares his thoughts regarding his mega-blockbuster's infamous post-credits shawarma scene. The evolution of that shot beautifully illustrates how a joke can take on unexpected meaning, which is ultimately what "Sleepwalk with Me" is all about.

'Sleepwalk with Me' is released by IFC Films and stars Mike Birbiglia, Lauren Ambrose, James Rebhorn, Carol Kane, Marc Maron, Cristin Milioti and Alex Karpovsky. It was written by Mike Birbiglia, Joe Birbiglia, Ira Glass and Seth Barrish and directed by Mike Birbiglia. It was released on December 18th, 2012. It is rated PG-13.



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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 24 2024 - 7:00pm):
<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/20966/blu-ray-review-great-extras-enhance-mike-birbiglia-s-sleepwalk-with-me>

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